

The Methodology of Teaching the Pesach Story Adults

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CUPS, KARPAS AND BNEI BRAK

My revered teacher, HaRav HaGaon Rav Moshe Shapiro zt”l, was not only a great Torah scholar but a superb educator and orator. In the following divrei Torah, I will incorporate many of the techniques he often used to great effect. First, Rav Moshe questioned ideas and aspects of Torah we are very familiar with, and that we therefore take at face value without thinking much. Rav Moshe also almost always took a direction that was unique, and differed from the “same old” explanations. In addition, he offered insights that showed the precision of our Sages’ statements, and their understanding of the Hebrew language’s depths and nuances. While the following divrei Torah are not from HaRav Shapiro zt”l, they do, I believe, illustrate his teaching

techniques and promote discussion, further exploration, and understanding of the Haggadah.

The Four Cups

One of the most prominent features of the Seder is the obligation to drink four cups of wine. The Talmud Yerushalmi¹ and Rashi² explain that each one of the cups symbolizes a different expression of redemption used in the verses in Shmot.

לְכוּ אָמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי ה' וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם
מִתַּחַת סְבֻלַת מִצְרַיִם וְהִצַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מֵעַבְדֹתָם
וְגָאֵלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּרֹוּעַ נְטוּיָהּ וּבְשִׁפְטַיִם גְּדֹלִים.
וְלָקַחְתִּי אֶתְכֶם לִי לְעָם וְהָיִיתִי לָכֶם לְאֱלֹקִים
וַיִּדְעֻתֶם כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם הַמּוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם
מִתַּחַת סְבֻלוֹת מִצְרַיִם.

Therefore say to the people of Israel, I am the Lord, and I will take you out

(vehotzeiti) from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will save you (vehitzalti) from their slavery, and I will redeem you (vega'alti) with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments; And I will take you (velakakhti) to me for a people, and I will be to you a G-d; and you shall know that I am the Lord your G-d, who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

Shmot 6:6-7

Generally, these cups are understood as ways to praise and thank G-d for each aspect of the Exodus. However, Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk³ understands each cup also as a “toast” to our ancestors and to the part that they played in their own redemption.

The first expression, *I will take them out*, refers to G-d extracting the Jews from the Egyptian culture. The Jews were culturally and ideologically assimilated,

believed in the Egyptian gods and followed Egyptian philosophy.⁴ “Taking them out” meant removing the Jews from ideological subjugation to Egyptian philosophy. Given the level of their involvement in the culture, for G-d to take the Jews out of the midst of Egypt would only be possible if the Jews maintained their national identity. The Jews did not intermarry with the Egyptians, as is implied by the Torah publicizing the one case in which this did occur.⁵ This expression of redemption parallels the first cup of wine, which is the Kiddush. Kiddush means separation or sanctification of the festival, and this can only be performed by people who are themselves sanctified and separate. Indeed, although the Jews were culturally assimilated, they did not intermarry with the Egyptians and therefore remained a separate nation. Thus the cup of Kiddush is a testimony to our ancestors maintaining a separation from the Egyptians.

The second expression, *I will save them*, refers to G-d saving the Jews from the threat of annihilation by the Egyptians. G-d intervened to save the Jews from death at the hands of the Egyptians, but did not, and would not, have intervened to save them from themselves. Self-destruction, enabled by the Jews’ free will, would not have been prevented by G-d.⁶ It was only possible, then, to save the Jews from the Egyptians if the Jews were not pursuing, hurting and killing each other. The fact that the Jews were saved from death at the hands of the Egyptians indicates that there was unity among the Jewish people, that they did not inform on each other to the Egyptian authorities, and did not pursue each other.⁷ Hence G-d saved them from the hands of the Egyptians because of the loyalty the Jews had to

each other, despite their oppression. Rav Meir Simchah sees this idea expressed in Birkat HaMazon, our prayer of thanks and declaration of reliance upon G-d. Only when we have trust and faith in G-d will we not become so desperate and panicked in the face of oppression that we turn on our fellow victims. In the merit of this trust in G-d, the Jews were saved.

The third expression in the verses in Shmot refers to redemption from slavery. We know from the Talmud that slaves often wanted to remain as slaves because they are comfortable with having no responsibility or moral strictures.⁸ Rav Meir Simcha attributes this to the low self-esteem of a slave, who has no pride in his ancestry, and does not see himself as important.⁹ The fact that G-d was able to redeem the Jews from slavery indicates that the Jewish people still retained an understanding of who they really were — children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — and that they still had pride in their identity. This is indicated by the fact that the Jewish people still used their ancestral names and named their children after their ancestors.¹⁰ The Jews looked at themselves as Israelites, and not merely as anonymous, worthless Egyptian slaves. Rav Meir Simcha maintains that this is “toasted” by the second cup of wine that is drunk at the first part of Hallel, which celebrates our connection to our ancestors and to our glorious past.¹¹

The fourth expression of redemption, *I will take you to me as a people*, states that G-d will bring us to Him and make us into an independent, sovereign nation. This would only be possible if the Jews retained a hope of building and becoming a nation. This hope is expressed in the fact that the Jews maintained an ongoing connection to the Hebrew language.¹² They realized

deep down that a sovereign nation must have its own language, and their maintenance of Hebrew indicated that the dream of nationhood was alive and well. Our toast to this merit of our ancestors is the last cup of wine, over which the second part of Hallel is recited. This section of Hallel focuses on the future redemption,¹³ and hence is an appropriate way to appreciate our ancestors’ hope for their future redemption.

Karpas

What is the significance of dipping the karpas into salt water at the beginning of the Seder? Why should this be done first? And what does the word *karpas* really mean? The Talmud states¹⁴ that when the Jews brought the Passover offerings back to their homes or tents from the Beit HaMikdash, they carried it over their shoulders like “Ishmaelite traders.” Similarly, some have a custom of carrying the Afikoman wrapped in a cloth and thrown over the shoulder.¹⁵ What is the significance of carrying the Passover offering specifically like “Ishmaelite traders”? Rav Shlomo Kluger¹⁶ explains that this is done to remind us of what caused our exile in Egypt. It was because Joseph’s brothers so hated and envied Joseph that they sold him to the Ishmaelites as a slave.¹⁷ In order to correct the sin of hatred, we reminded ourselves of the cause of the initial exile at the celebration of the Exodus.

Rav Yosef Chaim of Baghdad¹⁸ maintains that dipping the karpas at the very beginning of the Seder is a reminder to us that the cause of the exile was the hatred and jealousy that resulted in the sale of Joseph, so dipping the karpas in salt water reminds us of the brothers dipping

Joseph's coat in the blood of an animal.¹⁹ Linguistically, there is support for this explanation. Rashi in his commentary on the Torah explains that the *ktonet passim*²⁰ of Joseph was a fine wool garment. He cites a similar word, the verse in Megilat Esther that describes the Palace in Shushan as decorated with “*chur karpas and techelet*,”²¹ [hangings of] white, fine wool and blue. The only place in the entire Tanach where the word *karpas* is used is regarding a type of cloth, and this word is similar to the word used to describe Joseph's coat. It is no coincidence that we call the dipped vegetable *karpas*, to remind us of Joseph's garment being dipped in blood.²² By recalling this sin, albeit subtly, we hope to end the exile by correcting the sin of hatred and ending jealousy and resentment.

Bnei Brak

The Haggadah tells us of four rabbis who celebrated the Seder with Rabbi Akivah in Bnei Brak. Why did they all come to the home of Rabbi Akivah? This is especially problematic for Rabbi Eliezer, who maintains that Jews should stay home for Yom Tov.²³ Three explanations follow:

A. Rabbi Reuven Margaliyot²⁴ suggests a possible explanation. A number of passages in the Talmud describe rabbis, together with Rabban Gamliel, traveling together to Rome, where they would lobby the senate to help protect Jewish lives and property.²⁵ It is possible that on one of the trips they returned on a ship and landed on the eve of Pesach. They therefore went to the closest city, Bnei Brak, where Rabbi Akivah lived.²⁶ Ancient Bnei Brak is not located where the modern city is found, but was close to the port of

Jaffa,²⁷ and hence would have been the most convenient place to celebrate the Seder. Rabban Gamliel does not appear in the story mentioned in the Haggadah. Perhaps, Rabbi Margaliyot explains, since he was the Nassi, the Patriarch, they would not have been allowed to lean in his presence, so he did not attend.²⁸

B. Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook points out that Bnei Brak is mentioned²⁹ as the place where Rami bar Yechezkel, after arriving in Israel from Babylon, saw a goat licking date honey³⁰ under a date palm, its udder dripping milk into the honey. He declared that he had seen with his own eyes that Israel was indeed a “land flowing with milk and honey.”³¹ Therefore, what better place to gather and celebrate the Exodus than a place where they could see and appreciate what a beautiful land that G-d gave to the Jewish people after taking them out of Egypt.

C. Rav Yechiel Michel Epstein³² explains that these rabbis were all living in the time of the Hadrianic persecutions of the Jews, and they found it difficult to be in the appropriate frame of mind to celebrate the Seder properly. Therefore, they went to Rabbi Akivah who, as the Gemara³³ states, was able to see redemption even in the depths of exile: When Rabbi Akivah saw foxes in the Holy of Holies, he laughed while everyone else cried, explaining that seeing the depths of exile was evidence to him that there would be redemption, because the prophecies of both are linked. The others responded, “Akivah you have comforted us.” Therefore, on Pesach, in the midst of persecution, the other rabbis sought out the one person who could comfort them and celebrate redemption even in the midst of a terrible exile.³⁴

Endnotes

- 1 JT *Pesachim* 10:1 (59a).
- 2 BT *Pesachim* 99b.
- 3 *Meshekh Hokhmah*, Shmot 6:6
- 4 *Mekhilta, BeShalah Parsha 6, Yad, Avodat Kokhavim* 1:2.
- 5 Vayikra 24:10, Rashi ad loc.
- 6 See *Ohr Hachaim*, Bereshit 37:21.
- 7 Shmot 5:14, Rashi ad loc, *Ohr Hachaim* Shmot 1:18.
- 8 BT *Ketuvot* 11a, *Gittin* 13a.
- 9 BT *Kiddushin* 99a, *Bava Kama* 88a.
- 10 *Vayikra Rabba* 32:5, *Bamidbar Rabba* 20:22, *Mekhilta* Shmot, *Parshat Bo*, 5.
- 11 *Tehillim* 113, 114, 115.
- 12 *Vayikra Rabba* 32:5, *Bamidbar Rabba* 13:20.
- 13 *Tehillim* 116, 117, 118.
- 14 BT, *Pesachim* 65b, Rashi ad loc.
- 15 *Responsa Maharshal* 88.
- 16 *Haggadat Ma'aseh Yedei Yotzer*.
- 17 *Bereshit* 37:28.
- 18 Ben Ish Chai, *Shanah Rishonah, Parshat Tzav* 32.
- 19 *Bereshit* 37:31.
- 20 *Bereshit* 37:3.
- 21 *Megilat Esther* 1:6.
- 22 Heard from Rabbi Isaac Bernstein OBM.
- 23 BT *Sukkah* 27b.
- 24 *Haggadah Shel Pesach, Be'er Miriam* p. 24.
- 25 *Mishnah, Ma'aser Sheni* 5:9, BT *Shabbat* 122a, *Sukkah* 23a, *Kiddushin* 26b, *Avodah Zarah* 54b, *Horayot* 10a.
- 26 BT *Sanhedrin* 32a.
- 27 See Yehoshua 19:45, *Atlas Da'at Mikrah* p. 162, *Harper-Collins Atlas of the Bible*, p. 122.
- 28 *Shulchan Arukh*, OC 472.
- 29 BT *Ketuvot* 112b.
- 30 Possibly sap or maybe overripe dates dripping syrup.
- 31 Shmot 3:8. See Gil Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, p.153-154.
- 32 *Haggadat Leil Shimurim*.
- 33 BT *Makot* 24a.
- 34 For other examples of Rabbi Akivah's unique perspective, see BT *Sanhedrin* 101a, *Berachot* 61b, JT *Berachot* 9:5, *Sotah* 5:5.